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Atkinson, Colin

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Fully informed? A methodology for assessing covert informant coverage in policing and law enforcement

Colin Atkinson, *University of the West of Scotland*

Abstract

The use of covert informants has become a mainstay of contemporary policing in the United Kingdom as police, security and enforcement agencies tackle a range of crimes. Within such agencies, the need to understand the extent to which covert informants can provide information on issues of interest has become essential to effective practice. Drawing upon social penetration theory, this article proposes a new methodology to support police and law enforcement agencies in systematically mapping the breadth and depth of informant coverage. The future testing of such a methodology in practice will represent a critical area for further development and debate.

Keywords

Informants, covert policing, intelligence, analysis, social penetration theory

Introduction

The use of informants has become a mainstay of contemporary policing in the United Kingdom (UK) as police, security, intelligence and enforcement agencies seek to tackle a range of crimes. Covert informants are oftentimes referred to in these fields of practice as agents or ‘sources’ (Ingle and Staniforth, 2017: 124). Outside of such fields, and particularly among criminals, they are pejoratively termed grasses, touts, snitches or rats. From this rich and varied vernacular, Ben Fitzpatrick (2009) has highlighted the emergence of the specific legislative term Covert Human Intelligence Source (CHIS); a new nomenclature that Charl Crous (2009) has suggested is indicative of the modernisation and professionalisation of police–informant relationships. Developments over the past two decades have resulted in the formal regulation and professionalisation of police informant work, but the use of informants in policing has a long history (see Clark, 2007: 431; Shane, 2016: 2). In fact, in the ‘house of high-policing’ (Sheptycki, 2007), with its focus on crimes such as terrorism and organised crime, this tactic has long been considered as ‘typical’ (Manning, 2016: 25). Beyond the traditional use of informants in high policing, the tactic is now also commonplace in everyday ‘low policing’ both within and beyond the police service itself.¹ The current legislative framework in the UK – manifest in the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 and the Regulation of Investigatory Powers (Scotland) Act 2000 – provides the legitimacy and statutory footing for both high and low policing actors to legally use informants in intrusive surveillance operations (Williamson, 2008: 3).

Despite the long-held proclivity by policing and law enforcement agencies in the UK and beyond to use covert human informants (Innes, 2000: 358; Schreiber, 2001: 301), academic inquiry in this area has been relatively circumscribed, not least due to the difficulties of researching this hidden area of practice (see Norris and Wilson, 2016). Such a situation is particularly lamentable given the attention initially afforded to this topic in some of the pioneering texts of police studies (see Manning, 1977; Skolnick, 2011), and it remains reasonable to concur with Basia Spalek (2014: 831) that research into the role and use of CHIS is rare. Within the small number of studies dedicated to understanding informants in policing and law enforcement, there has been a tendency to focus upon the legal frameworks regulating this activity or the ethical implications of this tactic (see Cooper and Murphy, 1997; Gill, 2009; Harfield, 2009; MacVean and Neyroud, 2012; Omand, 2006; Shane, 2016). Nevertheless, a smaller subset of studies, covering a range of jurisdictions, has discussed the day-to-day practice of police informant work and the use of this tactic in policing operations (see Bacon, 2016; Billingsley, 2009a, 2009b; Crous, 2009, 2011; Dabney and Tewksbury, 2016; Innes, 2000; Lowe, 2015; Rajakaruna et al, 2013). A recent and still developing literature has also emerged in the discipline of

psychology, particularly coalescing around the evaluation of methods used to gather human intelligence (see Evans et al., 2013; Granhag et al., 2015; Oleszkiewicz et al., 2017).

A recent study (Atkinson, 2019) has highlighted the emerging role of intelligence analysis in police informant work in Scotland, and particularly the involvement of civilian intelligence analysts both in the targeting of prospective informants and in developing an understanding of the 'coverage' provided by existing informants. Informant coverage is understood in this context as the extent to which existing informants – the informant 'stable' – have access to, and can provide reporting on, the people, places and other entities of current and emerging investigative interest. Yet Atkinson (2019) also noted how analysts involved in the assessment of informant coverage lacked a commonly shared, well-recognised, rigorous and robust methodology to underpin such everyday practice, often leaving analysts to devise such methodologies in isolation. Further reflecting upon the empirical research outlined by Atkinson (2019) – which drew upon semi-structured qualitative interviews with 19 serving or recently retired practitioners with experience of police informant work in Scotland, identified through a convenience sampling procedure, and with the analysis of these data enriched by the author's prior experience as a practitioner in this field – this article proposes a methodology for practice that allows police and law enforcement agencies to systematically map the breadth and depth of covert informant coverage in their investigations and across the wider threat landscape. Importantly, the particular methodology advanced in this article allows not only for a comprehension of informant coverage but also for a developed understanding and prioritisation of *gaps* in this coverage.² This methodology, while practitioner focused, uniquely draws upon, and is underpinned by, Altman and Taylor's social penetration theory; and in doing so, it injects some explanatory power into, and invigorates, what has hitherto been a largely atheoretical area of police research and policing practice. Importantly, it is necessary to highlight that this methodology has not been subject to testing in its current form. Instead, this article seeks to offer analysts the theoretical grounding and practical support to integrate this promising methodology – or a version thereof – into their own practice. In doing so, it is recognised that the future testing and evaluation of such a methodology in practice will represent a critical area for any further development and debate.

Theoretical framework

Applying theory to any empirical research is useful as it deepens an explanatory analysis, rather than simply offering a descriptive account of a given social phenomenon. Yet, as recently as 2016, Dabney and Tewksbury, in their ethnographic study of informants in the United States, noted that 'more theoretical development is needed' in the study of informant work in policing and law enforcement (Dabney and Tewksbury, 2016: 188). They also contended that,

Despite its central presence in past and present-day law enforcement, confidential informant usage is largely understudied and underappreciated. While there exists a substantial body of literature aimed at providing technical assistance and training to law enforcement officials who are inclined to enlist the aid of confidential informants in their policing efforts, much less attention has been focused on the sociological underpinnings of the phenomenon. (Dabney and Tewksbury, 2016: 16–17)

The methodology proposed in this article seeks to offer technical assistance to those agencies seeking to understand informant coverage, but does so in a way that is theoretically informed. In particular, this article proposes that social penetration theory, as popularised in the work of Irwin Altman and Dalmis Taylor (1973), offers a promising framework through which police informant work can be both described and explained.

Altman and Taylor's social penetration theory is an approach to understanding the development of interpersonal relationships, with a particular focus upon the dynamic way in which these relationships move from relatively shallow forms of communication and exchange towards more intimate relations.

The principal mechanism through which this progression works, as noted by Altman and Taylor and in an earlier study by Taylor (1968), is mutual self-disclosure; the socially appropriate forms of which are embedded within a series of relationship stages. These stages of relationship development in social penetration theory are ordered sequentially as follows: orientation, exploratory affective exchange, affective exchange and stable exchange (Altman and Taylor, 1973: 136–141). Altman and Taylor evocatively illustrate these stages through their use of the ‘onion analogy’, wherein interpersonal relationship development can be characterised as penetrating through mutually layered personalities, with each layer corresponding to a particular set of contextual conditions. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

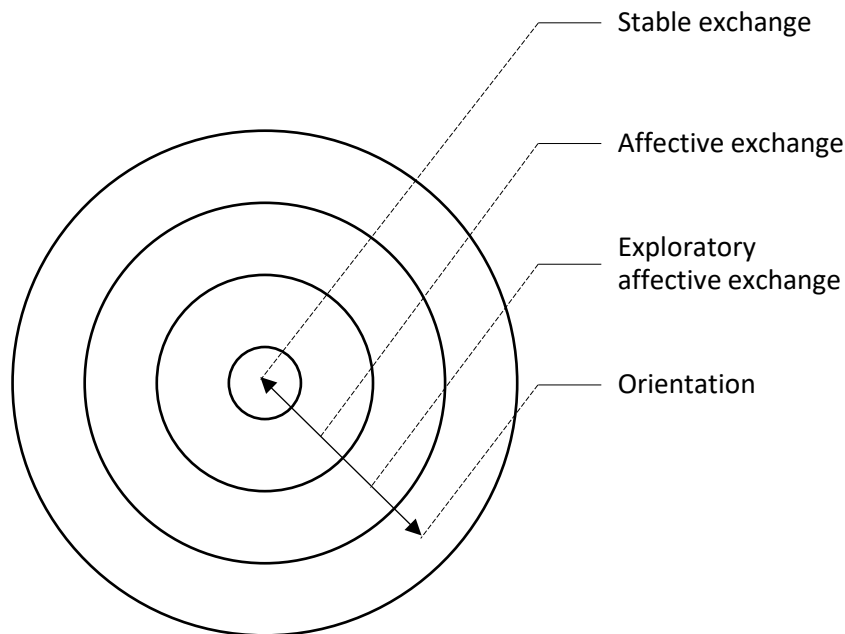


Figure 1. A social penetration theory model of interpersonal relationships.

During the orientation stage, interactions occur at the periphery of personality, often in public areas or social gatherings. Such interactions are characterised by their superficial and polite nature; reserving of one’s own personality and cognisant of the norms of the social context in which they occur, with any forays into the personality of others being both tentative and basic. Self-disclosure here is often limited to the visible body, dress and style. As interpersonal relationships develop into exploratory affective exchange, this second stage is characterised by an expansion in the richness of communication and an increasing, but still limited, synchronicity of dyadic exchange across both speech and nonverbal exchange. Communication here is smoother and more detailed than previously experienced, with increasing spontaneity and voluntariness of exchange. Altman and Taylor characterise relationships at this stage as generally friendly, casual and relaxed, and they recognise that many relationships will not proceed any further. Where relationships do deepen, the third stage of the social penetration process is exploratory affective exchange; a stage akin to a close friendship or courtship, within which interaction at the outermost layers of personality is free and loose, with heightened activity at intermediate and more private layers of personality. Exchange at these newly uncovered layers may still be somewhat guarded, yet balanced by a willingness to open oneself and reciprocate with the other. Having established exploratory affective exchange, a small number of relationships will develop to stable exchange. Altman and Taylor state that stable exchange, a stage achieved in only a few relationships, is characterised by openness, ease and spontaneity of communication through both verbal and non-verbal means at outer and intermediate layers of personality. Similarly, this richness of communication emerges as characteristic of dyadic

communication at the private areas of personality, with disclosure at these core areas involving the sharing, or knowledge, of very private feelings and closely guarded possessions.

For Altman and Taylor, the social penetration model is, in practice, neither as linear nor simple as the model suggests; relationship development is instead likely to be subject to spurts, slowdown, plateau and further progress, with no discernible endpoint ever in objective reach. Crucially, Altman and Taylor also recognise the possibility of gradual withdrawal and disengagement in interpersonal relationships a process they characterise as one of ‘depenetration’, wherein the quality of relationships deteriorates and interpersonal exchange moves from more to less intimate areas. Such depenetration is caused by the relative decline of mutual disclosure, for example, emanating from conflict or stress in a relationship (Altman and Taylor, 1973: 178–179). This theoretical framework of the development of interpersonal relationships provides a strong foundation to underpin a methodology that effectively assesses the nature and extent of informant coverage. Specifically, social penetration theory is used herein to explain the nature of the interpersonal relationship between the informant and the target, with a view to developing a typology that can be used to understand the nature and extent of informant coverage.

A methodology for practice

Fully understanding the extent of informant coverage is vital to current and future practice, especially as criminal activity becomes increasingly complex. The author has argued elsewhere (Atkinson, 2019) that even within a system that seeks to develop and exploit an array of intelligence streams – including covert surveillance, interception of communications and open source information – the use of informants in policing and law enforcement will remain common practice due to both the economic value of this tactic and the unique nature of the information that informants can provide. The use of informants in policing and law enforcement is long-standing, and the deployment of this tactic is likely to persist in the future. As such, this article seeks to proactively shape emerging analytical approaches to understanding and appraising informant coverage; approaches that take practice beyond a reliance on the subjective appraisal of those officers most closely aligned to those informants and who may have a vested interest in advancing a positive account of the coverage that ‘their’ informants can provide (see Atkinson, 2019). In doing so, a methodology is proposed – the ‘weighted spectrum approach’ – that allows policing and law enforcement agencies to comprehensively understand the breadth and depth of informant coverage in both operational activity and the wider threat landscape, including a developed understanding and prioritisation of gaps in coverage. To arrive at this advanced methodology, it is first necessary to sketch a basic analysis of informant coverage, a ‘binary approach’, and an account of how such methodologies can be integrated into routine business in policing and law enforcement. The limitations of the binary approach necessitate the subsequent development a ‘simple spectrum’ approach, informed by social penetration theory, before arriving at the most developed methodology: the ‘weighted spectrum approach’.

Binary approach

Any methodology for assessing informant coverage relies on a list of ‘targets’ about whom, or which, intelligence is required. The selection of targets should be led by a senior investigating officer (SIO) responsible for leading and managing an operation or investigation, and subsequently integrated by the analyst into the matrix of coverage.³ In Table 1 the character ‘x’ represents coverage (the source can provide coverage of the target) and ‘o’ signals no coverage (the source cannot provide coverage of the target). Targets may be people, places and other entities of current and emerging investigative interest (such as groups or vehicles).

Binary	Target 1	Target 2	Target 3
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Informant 1	x	x	x
Informant 2	x	x	x
Informant 3	x	o	o

Table 1: binary approach to mapping informant coverage

The principal advantage of the binary approach is its simplicity: it indicates, on the basis of the current capabilities within an existing informant stable, of where coverage is available and where it is not. This approach also provides an indication of the relative resilience of the informant stable, indicating where coverage is extensive and provided by several informants or, on the contrary, where it is reliant on a smaller number of informants. Decision-making in relation to current operations (and in relation to the future development of the informant 'stable' itself) can thus be informed by an overview of informant coverage against each target, as well the gaps in such coverage.

The effectiveness of any such methodology is contingent upon its integration into routine police business. As such, it is important to appreciate the processes, roles and practices that underpin such an approach. The initial request to begin the process of assessing informant coverage should be tasked by senior management to an intelligence analyst, who is then responsible for the creation of a matrix that features a complete list of informants (by pseudonym) and relevant targets. A request to complete the matrix itself (i.e. to provide an initial assessment of coverage) should be directed to relevant 'handler' for each informant, with this assessment audited and agreed by the 'controller' before onward return to the intelligence analyst. Typically, the 'handler' will be responsible for meeting with the informants in order to obtain relevant intelligence, while the 'controller' will maintain a supervisory overview of this activity and coordinate the work of the handlers under her or his line management. At this point, the intelligence analyst acts as a point of triangulation for this initial assessment, on the basis of the analyst's access to all sanitised intelligence from each informant and, crucially, other intelligence streams (such as police surveillance reports, data from the interception of communications, open source intelligence and intelligence from other human sources such as police officers and members of the public). The analyst may agree with the initial assessment, or further dialogue between the analyst and the controller may be required should the analyst seek to challenge or contest that initial assessment.⁴ Upon subsequent clarification, the intelligence analyst then disseminates the completed matrix to decision makers for action.

The key stages of this process, which should be embedded within a routine processual framework (such as National Intelligence Model-based tactical tasking and coordinating processes), are sketched in Figure 2.

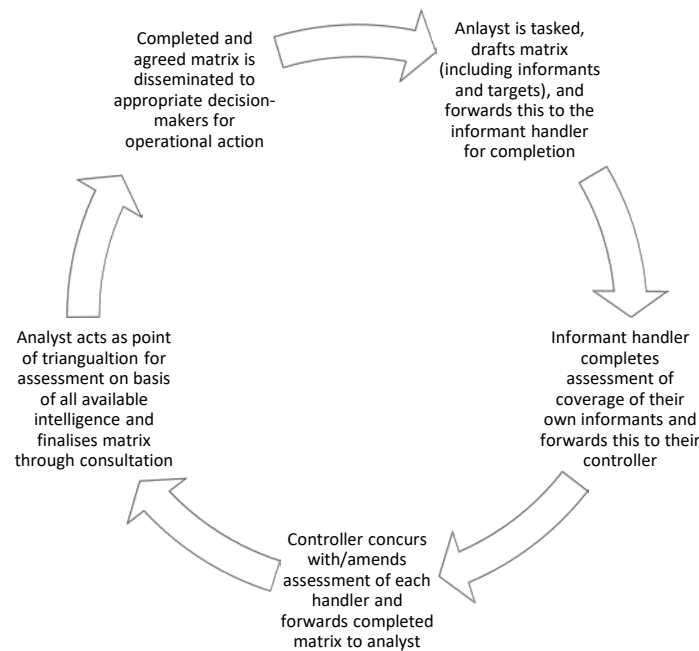


Figure 2: Informant mapping organisational flowchart

This process moves practice beyond the risks associated with handlers ‘marking their own homework’ and towards an assessment of informant coverage that is routinely embedded within a broader system of analysis and oversight. Additionally, the process tackles the perennial problem in police intelligence of tacit experiential knowledge residing ‘in the heads of the individual police officer’ and deployed only when beneficial to that officer (see Cope, 2004: 199–200; Ratcliffe, 2016: 98) through the creation of a more robust, accountable and organisationally resilient system in which such knowledge is documented, secure and searchable.

This system supports a new form of practice that is radical in some respects but conservative in others. In recognising the potential for conflict between police officers and analysts (see Atkinson, 2017; Brodeur and Dupont, 2008; Ratcliffe, 2008), the initial assessment of coverage remains with informant handlers although the triangulation process allows the analyst the opportunity to question and clarify where an assessment seems incongruent with the current or developing intelligence picture. Nevertheless, the implementation of this approach requires a degree of diplomacy from the analyst to prevent the alienation of handlers and controllers, who may perceive their professional judgement to be under a new form of organisational scrutiny. Similar care is also required to ensure that the cultural environment is suitable for the integration of analysis and intelligence analysts in this area of policing. As Jerry Ratcliffe (2008: 215) has asserted, in the context of attempts to integrate the ‘old knowledge’ of cops and the ‘new knowledge’ of analysts in intelligence-led policing, the power of the culture of police officers has the potential to marginalise the intelligence analyst and their function. Any cultural resistance may be compounded by the fact that analysts are frequently considered to be working to the agenda of police leaders and management, rather than operational police officers (see Evans and Kebbell, 2012, John and Maguire, 2007: 208–209). Given such challenges, and recognising the forms of cultural capital (see Bourdieu, 1997: 47) that are both valued and valuable in policing, research has indicated the importance of selecting a suitably experienced analyst in this role (Atkinson, 2019). Beyond any challenges relating to cultures, systems and process, the principal deficiency of the binary approach itself lies in its lack of sophistication. This method indicates where coverage does and does not reside in the current informant stable, but says nothing further about the nature or quality of this coverage. All coverage, and all *gaps* in coverage, are afforded equal status. The binary approach therefore, even when effectively embedded within a robust system or process, offers only a rudimentary basis for decision-making.

Simple spectrum approach

To address the methodological limitations of the binary approach it is possible to develop a simple spectrum approach, informed by social penetration theory, where the particular type of coverage that each informant provides is assigned a distinct value. A basic foundation, or assumption, of social penetration theory is that not all dyadic interpersonal relationships can be considered equal; such relationships vary by their levels of intimacy and exchange, the degrees of which grow and recede over time. The 'core' areas to which such relationships may progress towards, ultimately characterised as 'stable exchange', are also the repositories of those low visibility personality items that may be best described as socially 'forbidden' or 'undesirable', and the disclosure of which may represent vulnerabilities (Altman and Taylor, 1973: 18). It is reasonable to assume that such 'core' layers of personality are also sites where criminal activity is secreted by individuals. For example, terrorism and organised crime – activities upon which policing and law enforcement agencies would be particularly keen to obtain intelligence through informants – are characterised by their inherent clandestinity. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the details and dynamics of such criminal enterprises would represent closely guarded secrets, not to be disclosed to those individuals who were not trusted.

Developing Altman and Taylor's 'onion layer' analogy, the particular forms of criminal activity that policing and law enforcement may seek information upon may be secreted at the innermost layers of an individual's personality and are thus contained in sites to which not all informants will have equal access. The simple spectrum approach recognises the distinctive forms of coverage that an informant may provide and the ways in which this coverage, as per social penetration theory, may be considered as dynamic. These features are captured in conceptualising coverage 'levels', as illustrated in Figure 3. Working definitions for these levels of coverage are provided in Table 2.

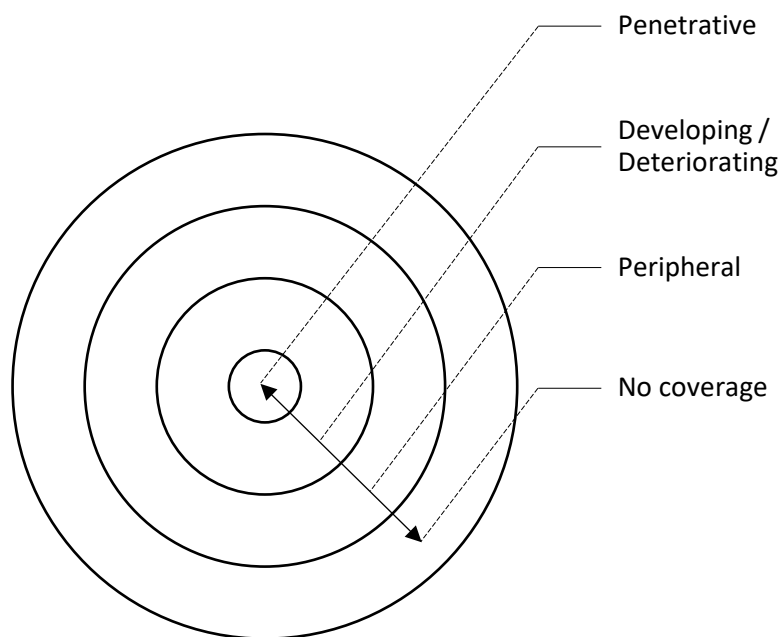


Figure 3: a model of informant coverage levels (adapted from social penetration theory)

Coverage level	Definition
No coverage	The informant cannot provide intelligence on the target.
Peripheral	The informant can provide some direct but limited intelligence on the target, and/or indirect low-level/contextual intelligence on the target.

Developing/ Deteriorating	<i>Developing</i> : the informant has well-established peripheral coverage and work is on-going to improve access and level of reporting (but not yet penetrative). <i>Deteriorating</i> : the informant has previously demonstrated ability to provide penetrative coverage of the target, but access and/or level of reporting has deteriorated (but is not yet peripheral).
Penetrative	The informant can provide direct and comprehensive intelligence on the activities, and any relevant associations, of the target.

Table 2: typology and definitions of informant coverage

For ease of recording, and to facilitate further analysis, each coverage level can be assigned a numeric value – ‘0’ represents no coverage, ‘1’ represents peripheral coverage, ‘2’ represents developing or deteriorating coverage (as appropriate) and ‘3’ represents penetrative coverage – that is mapped accordingly. This, the simple spectrum approach to mapping informant coverage, is provided in Table 3.

Simple spectrum	Target 1	Target 2	Target 3
Informant 1	3	3	2
Informant 2	2	2	1
Informant 3	1	0	0

Table 3: simple spectrum approach

In providing a more detailed assessment of the particular type of informant coverage, it becomes easier to understand the relative health and resilience of the overall stable. For example, in Table 3, it can be seen that the coverage of targets 2 and 3 is provided by two informants, but that the coverage of target 2 is more comprehensive in comparison (as it includes penetrative coverage). The organisational system that underpins this model remains identical to that which supports the binary approach (Figure 1).

In an advance over the binary approach, the simple spectrum approach recognises informant coverage as *dynamic*, allowing handlers and controllers to think about the future prospects for, and development of, each individual informant. For example, an interviewee who reflected upon his time as an informant controller remarked upon some informants as ‘the little acorns that grow into large oaks’ (James). Another controller highlighted how frequently informants can ‘start slow but grow in confidence’ (Fiona), while a handler noted that proactive informant development was ‘very common’ in his professional practice (Johnny). Yet despite the benefit of this approach in recognising the dynamism of coverage within a given informant stable – in terms of both proactive development of informants and any form of deterioration of coverage – a limitation of this model lies in the standard weighting of targets. In the simple spectrum model, each target is valued equally, irrespective of its importance to the operation or investigation. This is unintuitive and unsatisfactory, and also proves problematic in relation to gaps in coverage, which are also treated equally.

Weighted spectrum approach

In order to address the limitations of this simple spectrum approach, it is possible to instead deploy a *weighted spectrum approach* to the assessment of informant coverage. The weighted spectrum approach asks for no further work in the process of initial assessment: handlers and controllers remain tasked with the provision of an initial assessment of coverage against a target based on the scale ranging from ‘no coverage’ to ‘penetrative’. However, in the weighted spectrum approach the scores for each of coverage value are multiplied, by up to three times, based on the relative priority of each target in a given operation or investigation. For example, in Table 4 the scores for target 1 are

multiplied by three, the scores for target 2 are multiplied by two and the scores for scores for target 3 are multiplied by one.

Weighted spectrum	Target 1 (x3)	Target 2 (x2)	Target 3 (x1)
Informant 1	9	6	2
Informant 2	6	4	1
Informant 3	3	0	0

Table 4: weighted spectrum approach

The prioritisation of targets is decided by intelligence or investigative officers who are not involved in informant work. As with target selection, the prioritisation of targets should be led, for example, by an SIO responsible for leading and managing an operation or investigation, and subsequently integrated by the analyst into the matrix of coverage. A key principle of a weighted spectrum approach is that the priority attributed to each target can change as operation, investigation or enforcement activity develops. Thus, not only is informant coverage treated as dynamic, but also the relative importance of targets can change over time as they become more or less significant. The capacity to undertake such a dynamic assessment in a meaningful way hinges upon the routine embeddedness of the mapping of informant coverage in wider operational and tasking processes.

The weighted spectrum approach is advantageous as it presents decision makers with a guide to the breadth and depth of coverage against prioritised targets. Additionally, it provides a detailed assessment of coverage upon which to make assessments of the relative health and resilience of the informant stable. However, a disadvantage with the weighted spectrum approach as detailed in Table 4 is that gaps in coverage – or ‘known unknowns’ – remain numerically similar across all targets, irrespective of target prioritisation.⁵ To address this problem, it is necessary to isolate these gaps in coverage and weight them according to the target priority. The result of such an exercise, using the same assessments as detailed in Table 4, is given in Table 5.

Weighted spectrum	Target 1 (x3)	Target 2 (x2)	Target 3 (x1)
Informant 1	-	-	-
Informant 2	-	-	-
Informant 3	-	2	1

Table 5: weighted spectrum approach (gaps in coverage only)

In effect, therefore, this weighted spectrum approach also prioritises gaps in coverage and thus indicates areas for future action in relation to addressing such gaps. As with all of the approaches to mapping informant coverage detailed in this article, the weighted spectrum approach may be presented in its raw form or distilled by the analyst into a smaller set of key recommendations that may be more easily digested by decision makers. Importantly, such recommendations are based on a thorough and accountable assessment of coverage that is embedded in wider intelligence processes and that engages a range of stakeholders across the system. The implementation of the weighted spectrum approach, as a systematic and analytical approach to understanding and assessing informant coverage, offers real promise for more effective policing and law enforcement practice.

Discussion

The use of the weighted spectrum approach has the clear potential to enhance other forms of analysis in policing that require an understanding of how well the police is positioned in relation to mitigating criminal threats, particularly organised crime group (OCG) mapping (see National Crime Agency, 2017). OCG mapping is an intelligence gathering and analysis process used by police forces and law enforcement agencies in England and Wales to capture details of the suspected activities, associates and capabilities of OCGs; the assessment of which assigns each OCG with a numerical ‘score’. OCG

mapping further categorises each OCG into one of several ‘bands’, reflecting the range and severity of the criminality to which they are linked, alongside the level of capability and sophistication of each group (HMIC, 2015: 36). Scotland has an analogous analytical process, serious organised crime group (SOCG) mapping, that mirrors, to a large extent, the principles of the OCG mapping in England and Wales, albeit with an underlying methodology that is distinctive to that deployed south of the border (see Cavanagh et al., 2016; Hamilton-Smith and Mackenzie, 2010). SOCG/OCG mapping practices produce a detailed picture of the footprint of organised crime as it affects local communities. Across the UK, each locally produced SOCG/OCG map is used to target policing and law enforcement activity against SOCG/OCGs at the community level, as well as contributing to the national strategic picture of the nature and scale of organised crime through the collation and aggregation of these data by the National Crime Agency.

Reflecting on the genesis of OCG mapping in the mid-2000s, Stuart Kirby, then a Detective Chief Superintendent in Lancashire Constabulary, recalled how the introduction of OCG mapping was a ‘milestone’ and the ‘most systematic approach ever instigated to monitor OCGs’ (Kirby, 2019: 172). In 2008, as efforts initially began to map the footprint of organised crime in the UK, Stan Gilmour, the then Detective Chief Inspector of Thames Valley Police, highlighted not only that efforts to understand organised crime from the ground upwards will be ‘at the cutting edge of police activity for the foreseeable future’, but also that the development of methodologies to assist in the analysis of the collected data will be essential to effective practice (Gilmour, 2008: 26). In the decade since Gilmour’s assessment, the processes of SOCG/OCG mapping have used a mix of computer software and subjective practitioner judgements to provide the assessment and subsequent scoring of SOCG/OCGs.

It is important to recognise the limitations of the ‘British’ approach to mapping organised crime groups. OCG mapping, at least in England and Wales, has attracted some critique for its inconsistencies and variation in implementation, in part due to a degree of subjectivity in the process (see Kirby and Snow, 2016). The requirement to further enhance the coherence and consistency of OCG mapping as it relates to England and Wales was also highlighted by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate for Constabulary in 2017 (HMIC, 2017: 19–20). In Scotland, where SOCG mapping has been broadly welcomed as a positive development in understanding the nature of the threat from SOCGs and the harms attributable to SOCGs in local communities, it is notable that the mapping process includes ‘an assessment of the quality and coverage of intelligence used to inform the scoring process’ (HMICS, 2015: 23). The nature of current intelligence coverage also forms a critical and longstanding part of the OCG mapping process in England and Wales, and the ‘ranking’ process therein (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2011: Ev 185). Given concerns around the lack consistency in mapping processes, including around the subjective judgements used in areas like the assessment of intelligence coverage, a common methodology, such as the weighted spectrum approach, would offer a more robust method through which to appraise intelligence coverage against SOCG/OCGs. The adoption of such an approach would be particularly beneficial given that organised crime, like terrorism, is an area of policing and law enforcement that particularly relies upon intelligence from informants. However, given that, as previously noted, the Scottish system is distinctive from that practiced in England and Wales, a methodology to assess informant coverage may require enough flexibility to adapt to two distinct, but familiar, OCG mapping processes.

Conclusion

Previous research (Atkinson, 2019) has highlighted that, despite the emerging role of intelligence analysis in police informant work, civilian intelligence analysts have lacked a commonly shared, well-recognised, rigorous and robust methodology to underpin their everyday practice. In this article, a methodology has been proposed – the weighted spectrum approach – that, in principle, allows practitioners to systematically map the breadth and depth of informant coverage against prioritised targets, which can potentially assist in effectively identifying, appraising and addressing gaps in

coverage in a dynamic operational and threat landscape. This methodology retains the professional judgement of those practitioners – handlers and controllers – in closest proximity to, and with detailed knowledge of, informants, allowing them to make initial assessments of the level of coverage informants can provide. Importantly, however, these assessments are subsequently triangulated by the intelligence analyst and integrated into a matrix that contextualises coverage against prioritised targets, creating a detailed picture of the breadth and depth of informant coverage. This methodology may be embedded into existing tasking and coordination processes, ultimately facilitating more informed decision-making at strategic, tactical and operational levels. Moreover, there is a clear opportunity for this methodology to complement – or, more ambitiously, to be systematically integrated into – SOCG/OCG mapping processes in the UK. Crucially, however, the uptake and ultimate success of any such methodology will depend upon future testing in practice; developments upon which future research focus should be directed.

This article addresses, at least in part, the claim of Loftus and Goold (2012: 278) that there is a pressing need for further research into the everyday practices of covert police surveillance, including issues concerning the use of informants. The methodology proposed herein to enhance such practice is underpinned by an appropriate theoretical framework, thereby injecting explanatory power into, and invigorating, what has hitherto been a largely atheoretical area of police research and policing practice. In particular, this article has drawn upon Altman and Taylor’s social penetration theory – with its focus on understanding the development of interpersonal relationships and the dynamic way in which these relationships move from relatively shallow forms of communication and exchange towards more intimate relations – to understand and categorise the nature of informant coverage. The model of assessing informant coverage advanced herein extends from ‘no coverage’ to ‘penetrative’ coverage, recognising the dynamic nature and development of such coverage in practice. It is again recognised herein that the model proposed remains, at this stage, largely untested. Any implementation of the methodology proposed herein would thus benefit from an initial pilot project to assess its viability. Where such a pilot project demonstrates that the system is both robust and potentially delivers operational, tactical and strategic benefits, any subsequent roll-out would benefit from a subsequent evaluation at a suitable juncture to further assess the impact on practice. This article ultimately concludes by contending that just as there is a pressing need for further empirical research on the use of informants in policing and law enforcement, so such research can benefit from the analysis and insight that can be obtained by refracting such findings through theory.

Notes

1. For Jean-Paul Brodeur (2007: 27–28), high policing is characterised by the wide scope and strategic use of intelligence, the conflation of separate state powers, the protection of national security and the use of informants and undercover operatives. Low policing, somewhat analytically neglected in comparison, refers to policing in the Peelian tradition: the consensual maintenance of order and suppression of street-based crime using preventive patrol by uniformed officers visible to the community.
2. Intelligence gaps, in this context, accord with Oliver Higgins’ understanding of ‘known unknowns’. Higgins (2009) notes the importance of filling such intelligence gaps, and how this task is generally recognised as a central feature of intelligence collection.
3. It is recognised here that by focusing on agreed operational or investigative targets there is a potential to overlook ‘unknown unknowns’, or those emerging threats that were hitherto unanticipated until such problems had become established (see Higgins, 2009).
4. They may even, at this juncture, recommend the de-authorisation of a particular informant on the basis of the analyst’s extensive exposure to a range of intelligence streams (see Atkinson, 2019).

5. At '0', and therefore not subject to multiplication according to priority.

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